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ABSTRACT

This study investigated parents' attitudes toward the summer vacation period and their children's summer experiences. Participants were a nationally representative sample of approximately 400 parents of children age 5-14 years who completed telephone interviews as part of two subsequent omnibus surveys. Most parents ranged in age from 35-54 years. Nearly half had annual incomes of $50,000 or more, 67 percent were employed full-time, and three-quarters were married. Most of the parents were white and non-Hispanic. Parents wanted their children to relax and have fun in the summer, regardless of pressures to meet higher educational standards. Parents from all income levels wanted the same things for their children. Mothers were more focused on planning specific summer experiences for their children. Parents whose children were in organized programs or activities reported spending, on average, $625. Parents of color were more focused than white parents on having their children's summer experiences be educationally worthwhile. Safety was considered the number one challenge for parents when planning summer experiences. Participants in the follow-up survey responded to two questions: "What is the most important thing you hope your child gets out of the summer?" and "How has this country's increased attention to homeland security affected your planning for your child's summer?" Most parents said that increased homeland security had no effect on their summer planning. Over half the parents reiterated the notion that summer was a time for children to have fun and relax; only 4 percent wanted their children to get better prepared for school in the fall. An appendix contains the survey questions. (SM)

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In the Good Old Summertime: What Do Parents Want for their Kids?

By

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Academy for Educational Development
Center for Youth Development and Policy Research

August, 2002

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In the Good Old Summertime: What Do Parents Want for Their Kids?
A Brief Follow-Up
April 2003

The Academy for Educational Development (AED), an independent nonprofit organization involved in the field of youth development, conducted a survey of parents at the end of the summer 2002 to learn more about their attitudes toward summer and about their children's summer experiences. The results of the survey, "In the Good Old Summertime: What Do Parents Want for their Kids?," confirmed that parents still want their children to have fun, despite the pressures of high stakes testing and getting ahead. Given the current concerns about homeland security, AED recently fielded two follow-up questions with parents to determine whether these concerns were influencing their plans for their children's summer. Below is the report from March 2003. The report from the survey fielded in August 2002 follows the brief.

Participants and Procedure

A nationally representative sample of 412 parents of children ages 5 to 14 was interviewed by telephone as part of two subsequent omnibus surveys conducted during the second week in March (March 11-16, 2003). If a parent had more than one child between the ages of 5 to 14, one child was randomly selected to be the "focal" child. The margin of error for the combined surveys is ±4.8% for all parents.

The majority (65%) of the parents were between the ages of 35 and 54. Nearly half (48%) had annual household incomes of $50,000 or more. Sixty-seven percent of parents were employed full-time, and three-fourths of the parents were married. The majority (77%) of the parents were white and non-Hispanic.

The two follow-up questions that parents were asked include:
- What is the most important thing you hope your child gets out of his or her summer?
- How has this country's increased attention to homeland security affected your planning for your child's summer?

Results

- More than half of parents (55%) wanted their children to have fun and relax over the summer. Learning new things (9%) and being better prepared for school in the fall (4%) followed a distant second and third.
- Parents from the Midwest were significantly more likely than parents from the West (65% vs. 47%, respectively) to want their children to have fun and relax over the summer.[1]
- More than half of white parents (59%), compared to 45 percent of parents of color wanted their children to have fun and relax over the summer. On the other hand, more parents of color (17%) than white parents (7%) wanted their children to learn new things.

- Nearly three out of four parents (72%) responded that the increased attention to homeland security has had no effect on their planning for their children's summer. This is particularly surprising, given the fact that the survey was fielded in the week prior to the start of the war with Iraq. One in 10 parents reported changing plans for trips (e.g., canceling plans to travel abroad or

[1] All reported differences between groups are significant at the $p < .05$ level.

staying closer to home). Seven percent of parents said they will be more protective, such as always knowing where their child is or keeping their "eyes open."

• Parents who held a college degree were more likely than parents with a high school or less education (78% vs. 65%) to believe that the increased attention on homeland security has had no effect on their summer planning for their children.

• White parents were also less likely to be concerned about the effects of the increased attention on homeland security than parents of color (75% vs. 61%, respectively).

Executive Summary

The majority of schools in this country still follow an agrarian calendar, leaving parents to decide how their children should fill the nearly three months of free time each summer. Parents, particularly those in dual income households or those who are raising their children on their own, often struggle with how to secure fun and enriching activities while at the same time keeping costs low and matching these activities up to their own work schedules. At the same time, many baby boomer and Generation Xer parents may recall with fondness their own carefree summer vacations, filled with lazy days playing with friends outside until dusk and just "hanging out." For other parents, keeping their children safe is of utmost concern.

The Academy for Educational Development (AED), an independent nonprofit organization involved in the field of youth development, fielded a survey of parents to learn more about their attitudes toward summer and about their children's summer experiences. The results of the survey, "In the Good Old Summertime: What Do Parents Want for their Kids?," confirmed that parents still want their children to have fun, despite the pressures of high stakes testing and getting ahead.

Participants and Procedure

A nationally representative sample of 410 parents of children ages 5 to 14 was interviewed by telephone as part of two subsequent omnibus surveys conducted during the last weekend in July and first weekend in August. If a parent had more than one child between the ages of 5 to 14, one child was randomly selected to be the "focal" child. The margin of error for the combined surveys is ±4.9% for all parents.

Results

The five most striking results from this summertime survey of parents include:

- Parents still want their children to relax and have fun in the summer, regardless of pressures to meet educational standards, high-stakes testing, and "getting ahead."
- Parents from all income levels want the same things for their children.
- Mothers seem to be more focused on and aware of planning specific summer experiences for their children.
- Parents of color are more focused than white parents on having their children's summer experiences be educationally worthwhile.
- Safety is perceived as the number one challenge for parents when planning their children's summer experiences.

Nearly half of parents in the survey mentioned having fun as one of the three most important expectations they had for their child's summer, and more than a quarter of parents named "having fun" as the most important expectation. This result is notable because there is a push, at all levels of government, for accountability on the part of schools, teachers, individual students, and now, most recently, parents. In many communities, parents perceive that high-stakes testing programs have increased the emphasis on "drill and kill" to the detriment of learning in fun, creative, and enjoyable ways. Thus, it is possible that parents crave the "good old days" when

kids just hung out, played, and relaxed during the summer. It is also striking that parents from all income levels want the same things for their kids.

The differences between mothers' and fathers' expectations is noteworthy. These results support the popular notion that mothers are typically responsible for scheduling and organizing their children's free time, whereas fathers are not as aware of their children's schedules or activities.

The survey's results also revealed some differences between parents of color and white parents with regard to their expectations for their children. In general, parents of color placed more of an emphasis on academics than white parents. One possible reason for this difference is that parents of color believe that their children cannot take a break during the summer if they are to get ahead in school and in life.

It is not surprising that ensuring their children's safety was most frequently mentioned as the most significant challenge for parents in selecting summer programs. The survey was fielded during a time when several very high profile child kidnapping cases occurred around the country. These abductions continue to receive a great deal of media attention. Thus, it is in this climate that parents express concern about the quality of care their children receive as well as the safety of their children when they are in summer programs.

Introduction

The majority of schools in this country still follow an agrarian calendar, leaving parents to decide how their children should fill the nearly three months of free time each summer. Parents, particularly those in dual income households or those who are raising their children on their own, often struggle with how to secure fun and enriching activities while at the same time keeping costs low and matching these activities up to their own work schedules. At the same time, many baby boomer and Generation Xer parents recall with fondness their own carefree summer vacations, filled with lazy days playing with friends outside until dusk and just "hanging out." For other parents, keeping their children safe is of utmost concern.

The Academy for Educational Development (AED), an independent nonprofit organization involved in the field of youth development, fielded a survey of parents to learn more about their attitudes toward summer and about their children's experiences. The survey's results confirmed that parents still want their children to have fun, despite the pressures of high stakes testing and getting ahead.

Method

Participants

Telephone interviews were conducted with a national sample of 2,000 adults nationwide, including 410 parents of children ages 5 to 14.

Figure 1: Household Income

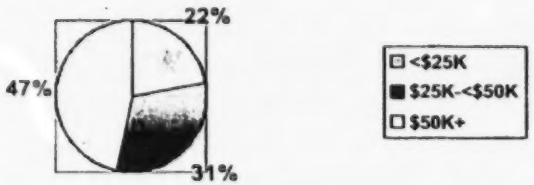
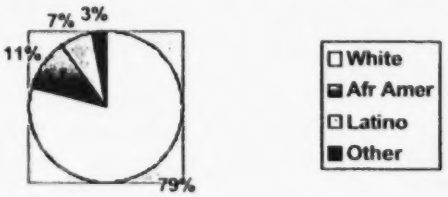


Figure 2: Race/Ethnicity of Participant



Nearly three-fourths (72%) of parents were between the ages of 25 and 44. Seventy percent were employed full-time, and three-fourths of the participants were married. As shown in Figure 1, nearly half of the parents had annual household incomes of $50,000 or more. Seventeen percent of the sample lived in the northeast, 25% in the midwest, 36% in the south, and nearly a quarter (22%) in the west. Figure 2 displays the race/ethnicity of participants.

Procedure

The 11-question survey was designed by the AED Center for Youth Development and Policy Research (see Appendix 1 for a copy of the survey questions). The survey was fielded as part of a weekly omnibus survey conducted by Ipsos-Reid, a market and opinion research company.

Data were collected in two subsequent waves during the last weekend in July and first weekend in August in order to obtain a sufficient sample of parents with children in the target range. If a parent had more than one child between the ages of 5 to 14, one child was randomly selected to be the "focal" child. The margin of error for the combined surveys is ±4.9% for all parents.

Results

The survey results are organized around the following themes:

- How are children and youth spending their time during the summer?
- How much do parents pay for organized summer activities?
- What are parents' expectations for their children's summers?
- What challenges do parents face when selecting summer programs?

How are children and youth spending their time during the summer?

Nearly two-thirds (64%) of parents reported that their children were participating in organized activities, such as sports, camp, summer school, or other structured activities. Of those parents who reported that their children were participating in organized activities, 32% said their children were participating in sports, 29% in camp (day camp, residential camp, sports camp, etc.), and 8% in summer school. Five percent reported that their children were travelling with an organized group or tour, 3% were in Bible school, 3% were in a daycare center, and 5% were in other organized activities.

Children and youth participated in an average of two organized activities with 6% participating in five or more activities during the summer. Children and youth also spent an average of six weeks in organized, structured activities. Eleven percent of parents said that their children spent 12 or more weeks in organized, structured activities this summer. Parents with household incomes of $50,000 per year or more were more likely to report that their children were in organized activities (71%) than parents from middle income (59%) or low income households (53%).[1]

Nearly a quarter (23%) of parents said that their children were "hanging out" during the summer. Other unstructured activities included vacations (18%), working (4%), reading (3%), going to the movies (2%), and other unorganized activities (14%).

How much do parents pay for organized summer activities?

Parents whose children were in organized, structured programs or activities reported spending, on average, $625. The amount of money that parents reported spending ranged from $0 (20%) to $1000 or more (20%) for the summer. Figure 3 displays the range of program costs that parents reported. Not surprisingly, parents from low-income households were more likely than parents from high-income households to pay nothing for their children's summer programs (40% vs. 12%, respectively). Similarly, parents from high-income households were more likely than

[1] All reported differences between groups are significant at the $p < .05$ level.

parents from low- or middle-income households to pay over $500 for their children's summer programs (37% vs. 17% and 23%, respectively).
There were also some regional differences in the amount of money parents reported paying for their children's summer programs. A third of parents from the northeast and nearly a quarter (22%) of parents from the south, compared to only 9% of parents from the midwest, reported that their children's summer programs were free, a statistically significant difference. However, parents from the midwest were more likely than parents from other regions of the country to pay $100 or less for their children's summer programs (see Figure 4). There were no regional differences between parents who reported paying more than $500 for their children's summer programs.

Figure 3: Parents' Costs for Organized Summer Programs

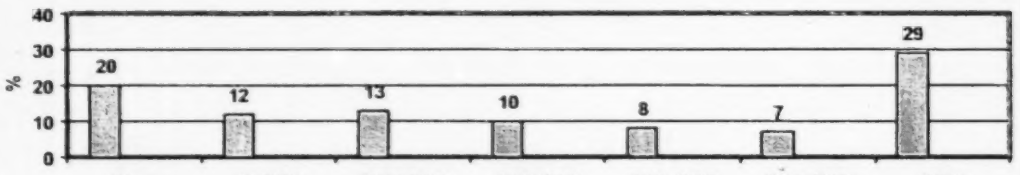
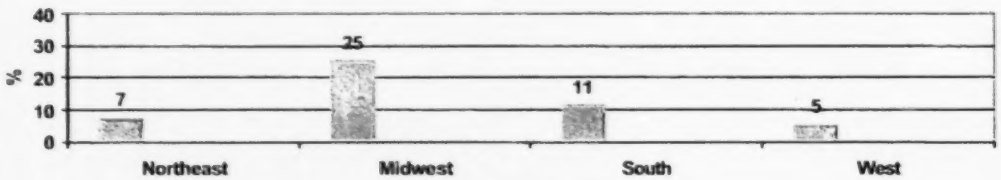


Figure 4: Percentage of Parents Paying $1-$100 for Summer Programs



More than half (59%) of parents responded that it was *not* difficult to pay, nearly a third (30%) said it was somewhat difficult to pay, and one in 10 (10%) said it was *very* difficult to pay for their children's summer activities. Not surprisingly, parents from middle-income households were more likely than parents from higher income households to report that it was *very* difficult to pay for their children's organized programs or activities (15% vs. 4%, respectively).

There were also some regional differences in parents' reports of difficulty paying for summer programs. Parents from the northeastern United States were more likely than parents from the midwest to report that it was *very* difficult to pay for their children's programs or activities (21% vs. 6%, respectively). Parents from the midwest were more likely than parents from the west to report that it was *not* difficult to pay for their children's programs (70% vs. 49%, respectively).

Parents' difficulty in paying for summer programs also varied by marital status and race/ethnicity. More unmarried than married parents found it very difficult to pay for their child's summer programs (20% vs. 8%, respectively). White parents were more likely than parents of

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color to say that it was *not* difficult to pay for their child's summer programs (64% vs. 42%, respectively). On the other hand, more parents of color than white parents reported that it was *very* difficult to pay for their child's summer programs (21% vs. 7%, respectively).

What are parents' expectations for their children's summers?

Parents were asked to name the three most important things that they hoped their children would get out of their summers and then were asked to identify the one most important thing. The three most frequently mentioned expectations included having fun and relaxing (43%), learning new things (24%), and preparing for school or their future education (22%). More than half of mothers (51%) compared to a third of fathers (33%) expected their children to have fun and relax. Mothers were also more likely than fathers to want their children to be prepared for school or their future education (27% vs. 17%, respectively). On the other hand, more fathers than mothers said that there was "nothing in particular" that they wanted for their child's summer (14% vs. 5%, respectively).

Parents with varying household incomes were not significantly different, overall, in what they wanted for their children. There were differences in expectations between white parents and parents of color. More white parents than parents of color hoped their children would have fun and relax (45% vs. 30%, respectively). More parents of color than white parents wanted their children to focus on their education (12% vs. 5%, respectively).

Parents of younger children (ages 5 to 10) were also more likely than parents of older children and teens to expect their children to focus on academics (27% vs. 16%, respectively). Seventeen percent of parents with younger children versus 9% of parents with older children said they wanted their children to be better prepared for school in the fall.

When parents were asked to identify their *most* important expectation, more than a quarter (27%) of parents responded "having fun and relaxing." Thirteen percent hoped that their children would learn new things, and 12% hoped that their children would be prepared for school or their future education. Again, parents with different household income levels were not significantly different, overall, in what they wanted for their children.

There were also differences between white parents and parents of color when asked to identify the most important expectation for the summer. More white parents than parents of color expected their children to have fun and relax during the summer (30% vs. 12%, respectively). Parents of color were more likely than white parents to expect their children to focus on academics, such as reading, education, and being better prepared for school (22% vs. 9%, respectively).

When asked to name their most important expectation for the summer, more parents of older children than younger children expected their children to become more responsible (11% vs. 6%, respectively). In addition, more parents of younger children than older children expected their child to be in a safe place during the summer (4% vs. 1%).

Almost nine in 10 parents (85%) reported that their child's summer has matched up with their expectations. Married parents, however, were more likely than unmarried parents to report that their child's summer met their expectations (88% vs. 79%, respectively). For those parents whose child's summer *did not* meet their expectations, the three most frequently mentioned factors that kept them from meeting their expectations included affordable cost (22%), work schedule (21%), and not enough time to plan (13%).

For those parents whose child's summer did meet their expectations, the three most frequently mentioned factors that enabled them to meet their expectations included a flexible work schedule (17%), choosing activities the child likes or signing up for the right programs (16%), and the availability of program options (13%). More mothers than fathers mentioned the availability of options as the most important factor (17% vs. 8%, respectively). There were also some differences with regard to household income. Parents from middle and higher income households were more likely than parents from low income households to mention affordable cost as an important factor (10% and 13% vs. 0%, respectively). More parents of color than white parents reported that choosing activities their child likes was the most important factor (28% vs. 14%, respectively) in meeting their expectations.

What challenges do parents face when selecting summer programs?

Parents were asked what they believed was the most significant challenge that parents in general face when selecting summer programs for their children. The three most frequently mentioned challenges included safety (27%), the high cost of programs (17%), and scheduling concerns, such as the need to fill up the day with activities when camp ends at 3:00 p.m. (11%).

Scheduling was more frequently mentioned as a challenge by parents from high income households (15%) than parents from low income households (3%). Quality of care was a more frequently mentioned challenge by parents who worked part-time than by parents who worked full time (24% vs. 10%, respectively). More parents of color (13%) than white parents (6%) mentioned making sure the program is educationally worthwhile as a challenge.

Discussion

The five most striking results from this summer-time survey of parents include:

- Parents still want their children to relax and have fun in the summer, regardless of pressures to meet educational standards, high-stakes testing, and "getting ahead."
- Parents from all income levels want the same things for their children.
- Mothers seem to be more focused on and aware of planning specific summer experiences for their children.
- Parents of color are more focused than white parents on having their children's summer experiences be educationally worthwhile.
- Safety is perceived as the number one challenge for parents when planning their children's summer experiences.

Nearly half of parents in the survey mentioned having fun as one of the three most important expectations they had for their child's summer, and more than a quarter of parents named "having

fun" as the most important expectation. This result is notable because there is a push, at all levels of government, for accountability on the part of schools, teachers, individual students, and now, most recently, parents. In many communities, parents perceive that high-stakes testing programs have increased the emphasis on "drill and kill" to the detriment of learning in fun, creative, and enjoyable ways. Thus, it is possible that parents crave the "good old days" when kids just hung out, played, and relaxed during the summer. It is also striking that parents from all income levels want the same things for their kids.

The differences between mothers' and fathers' expectations is also noteworthy. These results support the popular notion that mothers are typically responsible for scheduling and organizing their children's free time, whereas fathers are not as aware of their children's schedules or activities.

The survey's results revealed some differences between parents of color and white parents with regard to their expectations for their children. In general, parents of color placed more of an emphasis on academics than white parents. One possible reason for this difference is that parents of color believe that their children cannot take a break during the summer if they are to get ahead in school and in life.

It is not surprising that ensuring their children's safety was most frequently mentioned as the most significant challenge for parents in selecting summer programs. The survey was fielded during a time when several very high profile child kidnapping cases occurred around the country. These abductions continue to receive a great deal of media attention. Thus, it is in this climate that parents express concern about the quality of care their children receive as well as the safety of their children when they are in summer programs.

In the Good Old Summertime: What do Parents Want for Their Kids?

1. Please tell me all of the things that your child is doing this summer when he/she is away from you or his/her other parent or guardian. Please include any activities or programs that your child has already completed.

INTERVIEWER: DO NOT READ CATEGORIES ALOUD

- ☐ 1. Day camp
- ☐ 2. Residential camp
- ☐ 3. Family day care home
- ☐ 4. Day care center
- ☐ 5. Summer school
- ☐ 6. Travelling with an organized group or tour (e.g., teen tour, youth group trip, etc.)
- ☐ 7. Working
- ☐ 8. Vacation/Visiting with friends/relatives
- ☐ 9. Nothing in particular/hanging out
- ☐ Other_____ (specify)

2. Thinking back to the time this year when you began planning your child's summer, what were the three most ***important things*** that you hoped he or she would get out of it?

INTERVIEWER: CODE UP TO THREE RESPONSES--DO NOT READ CATEGORIES ALOUD

- ☐ Be better prepared for post-secondary education/college
- ☐ Be better prepared for school in the fall
- ☐ Be in a safe place
- ☐ Earn money
- ☐ Get into a specific program/attend a specific or special program
- ☐ Have fun/relax
- ☐ Improve his/her health
- ☐ Learn new things
- ☐ Meet new people/Make new friends
- ☐ Nothing in particular
- ☐ Other_____ (specify)

3. Of those things that you just mentioned, what was the one ***most important thing*** that you hoped he or she would get out of it?

INTERVIEWER: CODE RESPONSE-DO NOT READ CATEGORIES ALOUD

- ☐ Be better prepared for post-secondary education/college
- ☐ Be better prepared for school in the fall
- ☐ Be in a safe place
- ☐ Earn money
- ☐ Get into a specific program/attend a specific or special program
- ☐ Have fun/relax
- ☐ Improve his/her health
- ☐ Learn new things
- ☐ Meet new people/Make new friends
- ☐ Nothing in particular
- ☐ Other_____ (specify)

4. Did your child's summer match up with what you had hoped for?

- ☐ YES→ **SKIP TO QUESTION 6**
- ☐ NO→ **CONTINUE**

5. What is the ***most important thing*** that your child **has** gotten out of his or her summer?

INTERVIEWER: CODE RESPONSE-DO NOT READ CATEGORIES ALOUD

- ☐ Better prepared for post-secondary education/college
- ☐ Better prepared for school in the fall
- ☐ In a safe place
- ☐ Earned money
- ☐ Got into a specific program/attend a specific or special program
- ☐ Had fun/relaxed
- ☐ Improved his/her health
- ☐ Learned new things
- ☐ Met new people/Made new friends
- ☐ Nothing in particular
- ☐ Other_____ (specify)

INTERVIEWER: SKIP TO QUESTION 7

6. What was the most important factor that enabled you to meet your expectations for your child's summer?

INTERVIEWER: CODE RESPONSE-DO NOT READ CATEGORIES ALOUD

- ☐ Availability of options, e.g., program or camp
- ☐ Accessibility--for individual child (e.g., disabled child)
- ☐ Accessibility--transportation
- ☐ Affordable cost
- ☐ Flexible parental work schedule
- ☐ Other_____ _____ (specify)

INTERVIEWER: SKIP TO QUESTION 8

7. What was the most important factor that kept you from meeting your expectations for your child's summer?

INTERVIEWER: CODE RESPONSE-DO NOT READ CATEGORIES ALOUD

- ☐ Availability of options, e.g., program or camp
- ☐ Accessibility--for individual child (e.g., disabled child)
- ☐ Accessibility--transportation
- ☐ Affordable cost
- ☐ Work schedule
- ☐ Other_____ (specify)

INTERVIEWER CHECKPOINT: IS CHILD IN ORGANIZED PROGRAM (FROM QUESTION 1--CHOICES 1-6)?
YES→CONTINUE
NO→ SKIP TO QUESTION 11

8. During the summer, how many total weeks will your child spend in organized, structured, supervised programs or activities?

_____weeks

9. In total, how much money are you spending this summer on these organized, structured programs or activities for your child?

$_____

10. How difficult was it for you to pay for these programs?
- ☐ Not at all difficult
- ☐ Somewhat difficult
- ☐ Very Difficult

11. What, in your opinion, is the most significant challenge that parents face when selecting summer programs for their children?

Thank you very much for your time!

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